

BRIEF ON THE ASIAN SOCIALIST CONFERENCE

I. Background

A. Membership

The second meeting of the Asian Socialist Conference is scheduled to be held in Bombay November 1-10, 1956. Organized in January 1953 in Rangoon, Burma, the Asian Socialist Conference is composed of the following parties:

Socialist Party of Burma
Praja Socialist Party of India
Socialist Party of Indonesia
Labor Party of Israel (MAPAI)
Japan Socialist Party
Pakistan Socialist Party
Progressive Party of Lebanon

Two additional parties, the Vietnam Socialist Party (South Vietnam) and the Congress Socialist Party of Nepal have the status of observers. According to a Western Socialist observer at the 1953 Conference, the Indian, Burmese, and Indonesian Socialists constitute the inner circle of the Conference.

B. Organization

Organizationally, the Asian Socialist Conference is similar to the Socialist International. By statute the Asian Socialist Conference is a "democratic and willing association of Socialist parties which seek to establish Socialism" and "to co-ordinate their political attitude by consent." The Conference, which by statute should convene every two years, is the supreme body and corresponds to a Congress of the Socialist International. The Bureau is composed of two delegates from each member party and ordinarily meets once every six months to consider political issues, examine applications for membership, convene the Conference and other special conferences, arrange agendas, etc. It combines the functions of the Council and Bureau of the Socialist International. The Secretariat performs the same functions as the Secretariat of the Socialist International.

C. Ideology

1. Economic

Ideologically, the Asian Socialist Conference at its founding meeting attempted to define Socialism for Asia and to outline methods to achieve this objective. Regarding the economic system to be realized under Socialism the Asian parties agreed that Capitalism should be displaced rather than modified. This stand was primarily the result of Asian identification of Capitalism with colonial exploitation and the desire to condemn both publicly.

While unequivocally rejecting Capitalism, the Asian Socialists were not so positive in defining the Socialist economic system. They stated merely that "the exact forms of planning to be applied and the extent of public ownership should depend on the economic and social structure of the country concerned, but the central aim should be to foster a continued expansion of the nationalized and co-operative sectors of the country's economy." It was implied that these economic measures must be applied dynamically rather than peasant agrarian economies and the lack of capital necessary for industrialisation, be met. Although recognizing that the "workers and common people" in the industrialised Western countries have secured important economic and social gains, the Asian Socialists stated that "sterility will inevitably result" if they merely copied all that goes by the name of Socialism in Europe.

2. Political

With respect to Socialism's political framework, the Asian Socialists stated that the displacement of Capitalism and the development of a dynamic economic system could only be realized in a democratic society. In this society there must exist freedom of speech, organization, assembly, faith and conscience, and election of representative bodies. "These rights must be granted to all" and "imply the right of opposition parties to exist and operate."

While affirming political democracy in the Western sense, the Asian Socialists rejected totalitarianism and methods of mass coercion. They noted that Communism in the USSR and the satellites entails the complete subordination of the individual and the group to the centralized power of the leadership of the ruling party in contradiction to Socialism which recognizes man as an integral part of a class or group and as a human individual.

3. Ideological Conflicts

In giving equal weight to political democracy and an economic system based on a more dynamic application of the principles of economic planning and nationalization, the Asian Socialists in their theorizing did not face up to the fact, recognized by many Western Socialists, that planning and particularly nationalization, invariably conflict with the freedoms declared to be an integral part of Socialism. Moreover the economic and political statements of the Conference do not reflect the differences over methods which have at times led to splits within certain of the Asian Socialist parties, such as the former division of the Japanese Socialist Party into right and left wings and the recent split in the Praja Socialist Party. The principal difference as to methods generally resolves into a conflict between those who advocate the Marxist class struggle in all its aspects short of revolution and those who advocate more moderate methods to achieve gradually the Socialist state. Those advocating methods of class struggle are closer to the Communists and have co-operated with them particularly in elections.

D. Position of Asian Socialists in the Conflict Between the Free World and Communism

Regarding the conflict between the Free World and Communism, the Asian Socialists at their founding Conference advocated a neutral position in the sense of pursuing an independent foreign policy. While stressing the cause of peace (so necessary to Asia's development) and support for the United Nations, the Asian Socialists stated that their contribution to world peace "lies not in their identification with the so-called world peace movements, which have become tools of the cold war, not necessarily in joining any military security system, but essentially in their efforts to strengthen themselves." They added that "the independent position of the Asian countries and their freedom of movement with regard to the problems of world peace do not mean ideological neutralism or the policy of sacrificing the liberty of other peoples or nations to one's own selfish interests."

II. Assessment of the Asian Socialist Conference

A. Weaknesses

As an international organization, the Asian Socialist Conference is small and ineffectual. Like the Socialist International

it does provide a central forum for the Asian Socialist parties to express their views. However, in such a voluntary association the impact of views expressed from a central forum depends upon the political influence of the member parties. A brief analysis shows that only three Socialist parties participating in the Asian Socialist Conference have any appreciable political influence in their respective countries. These are the Labor Party of Israel, which leads the Israeli Government; the Socialist Party of Burma, which heads the Burmese Government; and the Japanese Socialist Party, the second largest party in Japan which gained 23 seats in the recent elections to Japan's Upper House. Of the remaining parties in the Conference, the Praja Socialist Party of India polled 16.3% of the total vote in India's last general election, but was split on 29 September 1955 when Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia formed the All-India Socialist Party. Neither of these parties is at present putting up a vigorous or effective opposition to the Congress Party. The Indonesian Socialist Party polled less than 2% of the total vote in Indonesia's last general election and won 5 seats out of 260.

The weakness noted above tends to lessen the effectiveness of the Asian Socialist Conference in yet another way. Being weak, the various Socialist parties are more interested in building up political strength in their own countries rather than expending resources in the Asian Socialist Conference. In fact, membership in the Conference is viewed as a means to enhance the prestige of Socialist parties within their respective countries. And where they are in power, as in Burma and Israel, the Socialists have been preoccupied with domestic problems.

B. Importance of the Asian Socialist Conference

Although the Asian Socialist Conference is weak in the objective sense, its importance should not be overlooked. It is symptomatic of a general Asian desire for co-operation in solving immense common problems and a desire to play an independent role in international affairs after long colonial exploitation. As stated by the Asian Socialist Conference, "All Asia is prostrate with the common malady of poverty which is aggravated by the ignorance of the common masses, inequitable distribution of wealth, the presence of Capitalism

feudalism, foreign exploitation and the total lack of proper contact and concerted action among the peoples." These and other common problems bind the Asian Socialist parties in the Conference rather than a belief in international Socialism.

Socialism in Asia also arose as a response to the injustices of colonialism, and is a demand for both political and economic independence. Given the magnitude of Asia's problems and rising nationalism, upon which the Communists are attempting to capitalize, the Asian Socialist Conference represents a collective symbol of the more democratic elements which are asserting themselves in Asia.

III. Probable Agenda of the November 1-10 Meeting of the Asian Socialist Conference

It is reported that 20 Asian Socialist Parties will be in attendance at the November 1-10 meeting as well as representatives from 7 fraternal organizations including the Socialist International, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the International Union of Socialist Youth, and the Movement for Colonial Freedom. At this stage the definite agenda of the meeting, if formulated, is not known. Agenda items which are known, as well as probable items, are set forth below:

A. Question of Merging the Asian Socialist Conference and the Socialist International

An important item scheduled for the agenda is the question of merging the Asian Socialist Conference with the Socialist International. The Socialist International took the initiative on this question as early as November 1954 when its then Secretary, Julius Braunthal, raised the question in his fraternal address to a meeting of the Bureau of the Asian Socialist Conference. Subsequently, Mr. Braunthal suggested to the Asian Socialist Bureau that a joint commission be set up to study the question of a merger and to work out the organizational structure of an integrated International. The Bureau of the Asian Socialist Conference decided to refer the suggestion to its member parties for consideration and to discuss it at the

next (Nov 1-10, 1956) general conference. The importance of this question to the Socialist International is evident in its plans to send as delegates Hugh Gaitskill, head of the British Labor Party; Erich Ollenhauer, Chairman of the German Social Democratic Party; and Adolf Schaefer of the Austrian Socialist Party. In the event any of the above three cannot attend, Julius Braunthal, will serve as a substitute.

It is to be noted in considering this issue that the Japanese Socialist Party and the Labor Party of Israel are also members with voting power in the Socialist International. In addition, the Praja Socialist Party of India and the Vietnamese Socialist Party participate in the Socialist International as consultative members. Notwithstanding participation of four of the nine Asian parties in the Socialist International and the public recognition by the Asian parties of the desirability of a single International, there were certain considerations which prompted the establishment of a separate Asian Conference. For one thing there was a feeling of apprehension on the part of the Asian Socialists that the Socialist parties in the Socialist International representing countries with colonies might not be entirely sympathetic to Asian problems. There was also the feeling on the part of the Asian parties that their problems of predominantly agrarian economies, inexperienced trade unions, and low levels of literacy set them apart from the European Socialists. Allied with this was the feeling that the European Socialists would continue to dominate the Socialist International by virtue of larger membership although the smaller Asian parties represented a far greater population. Finally it was felt that the Socialist International had committed itself to one side in the world struggle between the two power blocs, and that to participate in it directly would be tantamount to an Asian country forsaking its independence or its right to be neutral.

On the issue of merger, it is probably in the Free World interest that the Asian Socialist Conference be merged with the Socialist International. The Socialist International has unequivocally rejected Soviet Communist overtures for co-operation and advocates a more democratic brand of Socialism, including modification rather than displacement of Capitalism. In a merged

International, the parties of the present Socialist International would be in a position to influence the Asian Socialist parties and yet be in a position to protect their own interests by virtue of numerical superiority. It is recognized that the parties of the Socialist International would have to make some concessions to the Asian Socialists, but it is unlikely that these would be of a fundamental nature. The influence of the Socialist International on an Asian Socialist Party with a strong left wing is revealed by the response of the Japanese Socialist Party to the decisions of the Twentieth CPSU Congress. JSP leaders had hoped to avoid taking a stand on this issue, but decided that they could not do so, partly because of the 7 April statement of the Bureau of the Socialist International rejecting CPSU overtures for co-operation with Socialists. The JSP statement, while milder than that of the Bureau of the Socialist International nevertheless endorsed the stand of the Socialist International.

B. Asian Socialists and the Conflict Between the Free World and Communism.

Another agenda item will concern Asia's role in the conflict between the Free World and Communism. A recent letter sent out by the Secretariat of the Asian Socialist Conference stated, "the main idea of this conference is to be the defense of peace, democracy and human dignity, particularly in the present peace area of Asia and Africa." Pursuant to this theme, the Conference can be expected to comment on the Twentieth CPSU Congress and subsequent political events, probably in a vein accepting Soviet statements at face value. In turn this stand will be used to justify Asia's neutral position.

The Conference will undoubtedly call for continued efforts to strengthen the Asian countries and to strive for a vast "peace area" between the two blocs. In this connection it is to be noted that the parties of the Asian Socialist Conference are favorably disposed to Yugoslavia which, in their view, is "building Socialism" while maintaining a neutral position in the conflict between the Free World and Communism. At its first meeting, the Asian Socialist Conference specifically charged its Bureau with "Establishing closer relations with Socialist Parties in all the world, including the League of Communists of Yugoslavia." Subsequently, various Asian Socialist

Parties have send delegations to visit and study in Yugoslavia. All of these have praised the Yugoslav experiment, particularly the Indonesian Socialist group which recently returned.

On the issue of the Twentieth CPSU Congress, it is in the interest of the Free World that the Asian Socialist Conference adopt a position as close as possible to the 4 March statement of the Council of the Socialist International and the 7 April statement of the Bureau both of which rejected CPSU overtures for co-operation with Socialists. It is also of interest to the Free World that while recognising that the "problems of world peace do not mean ideological neutralism", the Asian Socialist Conference realize that Asian Socialist efforts apart from other democratic Free World forces only lessen Free World strength to the advantage of Communism.

C. Asian Socialism and the Economic Problems of Asia

A third agenda item will probably concern Asia's economic development. This will very likely involve a reiteration of the position taken by the first Conference which stated:

"Because of long periods of imperialist exploitation, Asian countries cannot develop, except at a rate that would be virtually neutralized by the growth of population, by their own unaided resources. The scarcity of capital and skill has to be made up by external assistance. Such assistance is at once a right and a claim created by past and present exploitation of Asian countries by the developed countries. While individual countries are not precluded from obtaining external assistance, it would materially reduce dangers inherent in such assistance if it is sought by the Asian countries in a co-ordinated manner and received through a world development authority controlled by the United Nations."

D. Condemnation of Imperialism

A fourth agenda item will be the question of colonialism or imperialism and freedom for all dependent peoples.

Significantly, the Anti-Colonial Bureau, a separate but organic part of the Asian Socialist Conference, is scheduled "to convene a separate conference at the same time with 20 freedom movements from Africa and Malaya to discuss concrete actions to end colonialism, which is always felt to be a perpetual threat to peace." The plan of action of the Anti-Colonial Bureau as previously formulated is as follows:

1. Encourage the holding of an All-African Congress.
2. Request the newspapers in Asian countries to devote more space to Asian-African colonial questions and support the demands of the freedom movements editorially.
3. Appeal to the Asian and other governments to intensify their efforts in U. N.
4. If possible, dispatch a representative of the Asian Socialist Conference to the U. N. to help the freedom movements put across their case.
5. Apply for consultative status at the U. N.
6. Send a fact-finding mission to colonial possessions in Asia.
7. Request each Asian Party to arrange for a year's stay by at least one African in its country, and to provide him with opportunities for studying trade union, co-operative, youth, and peasant movements.
8. Collect funds for the defense of victims of repressive measures in Africa and in other areas, to be administered by the Anti-Colonial Bureau on behalf of the Asian Socialist Conference.

E. Kashmir Question

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According to a June 1956 report [redacted] it was agreed at the request of the Kashmir Socialists, to place the Kashmir question on the agenda of the Asian Socialist Conference.